

# KNOWING GOD THROUGH PROVERBS

Wisdom, according to Solomon, is the all-important goal in life. He said, "Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding; for her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold" (Prov. 3:13-15).

RBC senior research editor Herb Vander Lugt led our team in the following study of the wisdom of Proverbs. It is our desire that you will not only see what God values, but that you will gain the knowledge of the One who makes the pursuit of wisdom so worthwhile.

*Martin R. De Haan II*

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# WHO IS THE BEST TEACHER?

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It has been said that experience is the best teacher. A child who touches a hot stove cries out with sudden insight and decides he won't do it again. We also learn through the experience of others. When I was a first grader I saw a boy, at the prodding of a classmate, touch his tongue to an iron bar on a bitter cold day. He panicked and bled profusely. I decided then and there I would never do what my classmate did.

Experience may be the best teacher. But it is also the most costly. It is far less painful to learn from observation and reading. That's one reason the book of Proverbs is so important. This collection of wisdom contains about 900 practical sayings designed to help us avoid the high cost of learning the hard way.

If you could choose your teacher, who could be better than Solomon, the main author and compiler of Proverbs? When he became the third king of Israel, God appeared to him in a dream and said, "Ask! What shall I give you?" (1 Ki. 3:5). When Solomon asked for an understanding heart so he could be a good leader of God's people, the Lord was pleased and gave Solomon an enormous capacity and hunger for wisdom (Eccl. 1:13).

Solomon's fame spread throughout the Middle East. Wise men from many countries found that he could converse as easily about nature as about philosophy. He wrote "three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five" (1 Ki. 4:32). God oversaw the writing, editing, and collecting of Solomon's proverbs, and they became part of the Old Testament Scriptures.

# WHAT IS A PROVERB?

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A proverb is a brief, provocative saying that expresses practical wisdom in colorful language. Often, it is a principle dressed up in an illustration. For instance, while a principle might state, “Good service is a mark of successful business,” a proverb would say, “Business is like the game of tennis. Those who don’t serve well end up losing.”

Proverbs occur in every culture as a means of communicating values and principles. The images they use are not only memorable, but they also open up areas of the mind and heart that are energized by concrete word pictures more than by mere ideas.

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## **Images and ideas approach the mind through different doors.**

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Some proverbs are one-liners: “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” Some take the shape of brief verse: “Unless there is within us / that which is above us / we will soon yield / to that which is about us.” Still others use the force of contrast: “It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.”

Proverbs are useful because they can be applied to many situations. A father might quote “Play with fire and you will get burned” to a son who is beginning to run around with the wrong crowd. A mother may use it to express her opinion of her daughter’s short skirt. A teacher may use it in conversation with another instructor who has enhanced the grades of a football star to protect the athlete’s eligibility.

# THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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Proverbs is one of five Old Testament books of poetry. These five—Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon—form a hinge that links the historical books that preceded them with the prophetic books that follow. These five books are also called wisdom literature.

<b>THE POETICAL BOOKS</b>		
	<b>MAN'S SIDE</b>	<b>GOD'S SIDE</b>
<b>JOB</b>	suffering	sovereignty
<b>PSALMS</b>	songs of praise	worthy of praise
<b>PROVERBS</b>	wisdom for living	bestower of wisdom
<b>ECCLESIASTES</b>	vanity of life	meaning for life
<b>SONG OF SOLOMON</b>	love in marriage	author of love

At first glance, the book of Proverbs seems to be a random collection of unrelated sayings. But a closer look reveals clear patterns. The first nine chapters repeatedly encourage Solomon's son to pursue "lady wisdom" and to avoid the "foolish woman." Chapters 10 through 30 follow with repeated emphasis on basic themes of humility versus pride, integrity versus deceitfulness, hard work versus dishonest gain, good-heartedness versus wickedness, carefulness versus rashness, encouragement versus slander, and peacemakers versus causers of strife. Chapter 31 summarizes Proverbs by returning to the imagery of a wise woman. The closing verses show wisdom personified as a wise and honorable woman of God.

# BOOK CHART OF PROVERBS

Purpose and Theme	A Father's Instruction	Proverbs of Solomon (first collection)	Words of Wise Men	Proverbs of Solomon (collected by Hezekiah)	Words of Agur	Words of King Lemuel	Alphabet of Wisdom (depicted by virtuous wife)
1:1-7	1:8	9 10 22:16	22:17 24	25 29	30	31:1-9	31:10-31
Prologue		Maxims			Epilogue		
Wisdom Praised		Wisdom Applied					
Wisdom Personified		Wisdom Principalized			Wisdom Practiced		
For Youth		For All					
Solomon			Wise Men	Solomon	Agur and Lemuel		

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7).

# WISDOM BEGINS WITH GOD

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At first glance, the book of Proverbs may seem more business than Bible. Over and over it emphasizes the daily practical issues of honest business practices, hard work, the advantages and hazards of wealth, the seductive nature of a bribe, and the dangers of flattery, greed, uncontrolled anger, and alcoholism.

A closer look, however, will show how prominent God is in the book of Proverbs. The name YAHWEH is used 89 times. Behind every proverb is the personal God of Israel, the self-existent God of our creation who loves us and longs for us to live in such a way as to bring honor to ourselves and Him.

This God-centeredness is stated in the key verse of Proverbs: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (1:7). The thesis is clear: Those who fear God and live by His principles can be assured of His approval and blessing.

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years of life will be added to you (9:10-11).*

The fear of the Lord is more than reverential trust; it includes being afraid of displeasing Him. It recognizes His holiness and our sinfulness. It realizes that His anger is something to be avoided. It produces a desire to please and trust Him.

To please God, however, we must know what He values. What does He care about? What does He love? What does He hate? In the following pages we will find “proverbial answers” to these questions.

# WHAT DOES GOD VALUE?

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The sixth chapter of Proverbs describes the values of God in reverse. Using the human body as a memory device, Solomon described seven things God hates. As the wisest of men, he wrote:

*These six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren (6:16-19).*

In these verses, Solomon gave us a photograph of the values of God in negative form. From this negative we can develop a positive picture of what God values. By telling us what arouses the anger of the heavens, Solomon also showed us what brings a smile to the face of God.

For example, if God hates the proud look of a person who delights in someone else's poverty or ignorance, then our Lord also loves those eyes that see the needs and feelings of others as more important than their own. If God hates the proud look, then we are reminded that He loves humility.

When we know what God hates, we can discover the positive values that were in His mind when He created us for the joy of sharing those values with us. We can also find a good way of summarizing the practical advice given to us in the book of Proverbs. By discovering the values of God, we can understand why He has planned life and eternity to favor the person who lives according to the values and loves of

the heavens. We can see why God associates His values with prosperity, a long life, a good name, and a happy home.

Let's take a closer look at these loves and values that lie behind the rich images and practical advice of the Proverbs. Let's move from the negative list of what God hates, to the positive list that explains those hates.



## EYES OF HUMILITY

*“The LORD hates . . . a proud look” (6:16-17).*

The book of Proverbs shows that the heavens shudder when a mortal looks down his nose at a brother. God sees us when we assume that our interests and pains give us a right to disregard the interests and pains of others. His emotions are aroused when we act as though we are the center of the universe, when we assume that we exist for our own enjoyment, or when we rely on our natural instincts rather than taking pains to pursue the wisdom and knowledge of God.

Warning about the danger of assuming the rightness of our own thoughts and interests, Solomon said:

♥ *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and depart from evil (3:5-7).*

♥ *The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and*

*arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate (8:13).*

☛ *When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom (11:2).*

☛ *By pride comes nothing but strife, but with the well-advised is wisdom (13:10).*

☛ *Everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; though they join forces, none will go unpunished (16:5).*

☛ *Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud (16:18-19).*

☛ *Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the hearts (21:2).*

☛ *A haughty look, a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked are sin (21:4).*

☛ *A man's pride will bring him low, but the humble in spirit will retain honor (29:23).*

☛ *There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes, yet is not washed from its filthiness. There is a generation—oh, how lofty are their eyes! And their eyelids are lifted up (30:12-13).*

The word pictures and wise sayings of the book of Proverbs show why God hates a proud look. Pride makes a fool of those who possess it. It results in self-deception, for it creates an exaggerated sense of one's own importance or abilities. Pride results in disagreement with God and reflects an unwillingness to trust Him. Pride removes a basis for relationship with God (see James 4:6). It results in personal embarrassment, broken hearts, and destruction.

In contrast, the eyes of humility lead to honor. Humility prompts us to offset our own tendency toward

self-deception by seeking the wisdom of God and the counsel of others. Humility is practical. It provides a basis for relationship with the God who is able to help us and who is able to keep us from falling into all kinds of dishonor.

#### SEEING GOD

- God is watching the way we look at others.
- In a list of the things God hates, the first one mentioned is pride.
- God values humility because He knows what pride does to us and because He knows that humility puts us in touch with Him, others, and ourselves.
- What God means by humility is seen by the way Christ served His Father and His disciples.

#### SEEING OURSELVES

- We are inclined to have an exaggerated sense of our own opinions and interests, and a diminished awareness of the needs of others.
- Because of our tendency toward pride, we need the cross, the Spirit, and the example of Christ.

#### A TONGUE OF TRUTH

*“The LORD hates . . . a lying tongue” (6:16-17).*

The word pictures and wise sayings of Solomon show that the opposite of truth is not error but evil. Lying lips reflect more than misinformation or disinformation. Lying lips express the denial and

darkness that mark the path that leads away from God.

By lies of flattery, young people are persuaded to



be sexually intimate before marriage. By countless denials, alcoholics keep help at arm's length and drag those who love them through the living nightmares of their addiction. By lies of seduction, sexual predators convince children to trust them. By deception, marriage partners are betrayed, life savings are lost, and countless persons are led to believe that there is no higher purpose than to live for themselves. By trickery, people are led away by "the father of lies" from the One who made them—to their own eternal loss. For such reasons, Proverbs says:

☞ *For my mouth will speak truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips (8:7).*

☞ *Whoever hides hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool (10:18).*

☞ *Dishonest scales are an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is His delight (11:1).*

☞ *The integrity of the upright will guide them, but the perversity of the unfaithful will destroy them (11:3).*

☞ *The truthful lip shall be established forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment (12:19).*

☞ *Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal truthfully are His delight (12:22).*

☞ *Better is the poor who walks in his integrity than one who is perverse in his lips, and is a fool (19:1).*

☞ *"It is good for nothing," cries the buyer; but when he has gone his way, then he boasts (20:14).*

☞ *Buy the truth, and do not sell it, also wisdom and instruction and understanding (23:23).*

It's no wonder God hates deception. The word pictures and wise sayings of Proverbs remind us that

deception is the basis of betrayal. Betrayal destroys trust. Without trust and truth there is no basis for loving relationships.

Truth is the essential foundation of good business, good government, and good science. Truth is the basis of faithful marriages, lasting friendships, and a personal relationship with God.

Lies are hellish tactics of the devil. They are sources of darkness rather than light, and sorrow rather than rejoicing. Lies steal honor for a moment, while assuring that the honor will later turn into shame.

#### **SEEING GOD**

- The emotions of God are aroused when we deny the truth to cover our sin.
- God stands behind those who are willing to tell the truth even to their own temporary loss.
- God's attitude toward truth is clearly seen in Christ, who chose to trust His Father to the death rather than ever to speak a word of deception.

#### **SEEING OURSELVES**

- We are inclined to lie because of the embarrassment of the sin that is within us.
- When we lie, we are choosing to trust our own ability to protect ourselves rather than God's ability to forgive and bless us.
- Because of our lies, we desperately need Christ's payment for our sin, just as we also need His Spirit to fill us with His grace and truth.



## HANDS OF HONEST WORK

*“The LORD hates . . . hands that shed innocent blood” (6:16-17).*

The book of Proverbs shows that the emotion of heaven is aroused when a man eats the bread of violence rather than the desserts of hard work.

Many of Solomon’s word pictures and wise sayings show how God feels about those who “shed innocent blood” in order to get what they want. He is angered when He sees hands that were made to help others used instead to rob, defraud, and murder.

“Hands that shed innocent blood” are the instruments of pride and deception. They are strengthened by a proud heart that regards one’s own interests as more important than the interests of others. Their work is fueled by the lie that we have a right to take by force something we have not rightfully earned or otherwise received.

“Hands that shed innocent blood” are hands full of rebellion against God. They are hands that have shoved aside the wisdom of God, which tells us that we are made to be satisfied with God’s blessing on the work of humble and honest hands.

The book of Proverbs is full of warnings against shortcuts that lead to disaster. Solomon and his wise friends reminded us that success does not come by hiding from the morning under sheets of procrastination and pillows of laziness. The blessing of God does not come to those who spend all their free time fish-

ing, and bowling, and playing cards, while the fences are broken down, paint is peeling off the walls, and the kids are running wild in the neighborhood.

Solomon called for hands that work hard at marriage, child-rearing, business, and friendship. He made it clear that we have not been born into this world to go through life eating food that has been earned and prepared by others:

☛ *Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise, which, having no captain, overseer or ruler, provides her supplies in the summer, and gathers her food in the harvest. How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep—so shall your poverty come on you like a prowler, and your need like an armed man (6:6-11).*

☛ *He who has a slack hand becomes poor, but the hand of the diligent makes rich (10:4).*

☛ *The hand of the diligent will rule, but the lazy man will be put to forced labor (12:24).*

☛ *The lazy man does not roast what he took in hunting, but diligence is man's precious possession (12:27).*

☛ *The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing; but the soul of the diligent shall be made rich (13:4).*

☛ *In all labor there is profit, but idle chatter leads only to poverty (14:23).*

☛ *He who is slothful in his work is a brother to him who is a great destroyer (18:9).*

☛ *Do not love sleep, lest you come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will be satisfied with bread (20:13).*

☛ *Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before unknown men (22:29).*

☛ *He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows frivolity will have poverty enough! (28:19).*

Recognition of work as a divinely ordained, noble calling is a great need today. It would transform our society. A Lou Harris poll, cited by Daniel Yankelovitch in *Psychology Today*, May 1982, indicated that 63 percent of American workers are convinced that people don't work as hard as they did 20 years ago; 78 percent say people don't take as much pride in their work; 69 percent think our workmanship is inferior; and 73 percent believe our workers are less motivated.

In the same article, Yankelovitch tells of another 1982 survey in which only 16 percent of the workers interviewed said they were doing the best job they could at work. This means that 84 percent realized they could do better; some said they could be twice as productive if they really tried. When asked why they didn't do better, the 84 percent said that the only reason they could see for working harder is to gain more money from it.

Physical and mental labor is good, not evil. Work is a fundamental element in the good life. God so made us that we are happiest and most fulfilled when we work hard, have a sense of accomplishment, and accumulate the results of our labor. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon wrote:

*It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils . . . for it is his heritage. . . . this is the gift of God.*

*For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart (Eccl. 5:18-22).*

The book of Proverbs tells us that God values hands that work diligently in business, family, church, and community life. He values hard work, not because it gives quick or immediate payoffs, but because in time, work that is done with a heart full of reverence and love will be rewarded with the honors of God.

### **SEEING GOD**

- God values honest work not only because it reflects the way He works in the world, but because it reflects the way He wants to work in and through us.
- God rewards those who choose to work hard for relatively little, while others make themselves rich with the profits of fraud and deception.
- God's hatred for fraud, cheating, and cruel opportunism should be feared by every businessman.
- God's greatest work is seen in the work Christ did to give us the reward of an honest salvation.

### **SEEING OURSELVES**

- Our tendency is to do honest work when others are watching and giving us the incentive to be productive.
- Because of the fall of mankind into sin, we have become self-centered, wanting an easy life without working for it.
- Our highest calling is to do our work with the perspective that we are working for God, not man.
- Because of our own failure to work hard at our relationships with God and others, we would be lost without the payment of Christ for our sin.



## A GOOD HEART

*“The LORD hates . . . a heart that devises wicked plans” (6:16,18).*

The word pictures and wise sayings of Solomon repeatedly remind us that God hates a heart that is used for violence instead of love. With stark images of destruction, the book of

Proverbs reminds us that the heavens despise an imagination that is excited by the passions of pride, dishonesty, and violence.

God made our hearts for Himself. Our reason for existence is to fear, to love, to honor, and to enjoy Him forever. Our mission in life is to discover from the depths of our hearts the richness of His love for us and for others.

The book of Proverbs shows us the importance of the condition of our heart:

- ♥ *Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life (4:23).*
- ♥ *Those who are of a perverse heart are an abomination to the LORD, but the blameless in their ways are His delight (11:20).*
- ♥ *A man will be commended according to his wisdom, but he who is of a perverse heart will be despised (12:8).*
- ♥ *Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but counselors of peace have joy (12:20).*
- ♥ *A sound heart is life to the body, but envy is rottenness to the bones (14:30).*
- ♥ *The heart of him who has understanding seeks*

*knowledge, but the mouth of fools feeds on foolishness (15:14).*

☛ *A merry heart does good, like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones (17:22).*

☛ *Do not let your heart envy sinners, but be zealous for the fear of the LORD all the day (23:17).*

☛ *My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways (23:26).*

☛ *He who is of a proud heart stirs up strife, but he who trusts in the LORD will be prospered (28:25).*

The word pictures and wise sayings of Solomon make it clear that the imagination of our heart determines whether we will be creatively good or creatively evil. We will dream about good or we will dream about evil. Our imagination will be stirred up by the hope of heaven or by a momentary promise of blind desire.

#### **SEEING GOD**

- God wants us to be more concerned about what is in us than what is around us.
- God promises to sovereignly lead us through the circumstances of life as we give Him the ways and loves of our heart.
- God's emphasis on the condition of our hearts is seen clearly in the attitudes and teachings of the Lord Jesus.

#### **SEEING OURSELVES**

- Our greatest needs are not needs of family, work-place, or checkbook—our greatest needs are the needs of our own heart.
- Because our tendency is to use our imagination for evil rather than for good, we would be lost without Christ's payment for our sin and His Spirit to create within us a clean heart.



## FEET OF CAUTION

*"The LORD hates . . . feet that are swift in running to evil" (6:16,18).*

The proverbs of Solomon emphasize that God hates feet that run recklessly into the trap of trouble and misery. By contrast, God values self-control and caution. In all relationships

and areas of life, He values feet that sense danger and stay clear of trouble. He warns of feet that walk in the path of wickedness and edge curiously and dangerously close to temptation.

The Lord made feet to enable us to walk throughout all the earth in His service, not to carry us into trouble and misery. He made feet to enable us to run from temptation, not to chase after evil.

Solomon's collection of word pictures and wise sayings are meant to make young people street-wise and head-smart in dealing with the dangers of home, wealth, debt, business, alcohol, and sexual desire.

Urging caution and thoughtfulness, Solomon wrote:

- ☛ *Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evil (4:14).*
- ☛ *Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established (4:26).*
- ☛ *A quick-tempered man acts foolishly, and a man of wicked intentions is hated (14:17).*
- ☛ *He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly (14:29).*

- ☞ *The light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and a good report makes the bones healthy (15:30).*
- ☞ *He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city (16:32).*
- ☞ *He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him (18:13).*
- ☞ *It is not good for a soul to be without knowledge, and he sins who hastens with his feet (19:2).*
- ☞ *It is a snare for a man to devote rashly something as holy, and afterward to reconsider his vows (20:25).*
- ☞ *By wise counsel you will wage your own war, and in a multitude of counselors there is safety (24:6).*
- ☞ *Do not go hastily to court; for what will you do in the end, when your neighbor has put you to shame? (25:8).*
- ☞ *A fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back (29:11).*

Cautious feet don't just happen; they are the result of the other factors of wisdom that we have already considered. Cautious feet are the result of humble eyes that do not assume they see all there is to see. They are the result of truthful tongues that are not ready to cover up and deny foolish gambles. Cautious feet are the result of honest hands committed to honest work rather than to foolish or illegal risks. They are the result of good hearts that are looking not for a way to take chances with evil, but for ways to do good. Caution is natural to a wise person and unnatural to the foolish.

### SEEING GOD

- From His perspective, God can see far better than we can that without caution in the river of life we will quickly find ourselves over our head in trouble and swept along by the rapids of temptation.
- God wants us to develop a spirit of caution and self-discipline in everything we do.
- God's ability to see dangers we are apt to miss is seen in Christ's warnings about the Pharisees who were some of the most religious and reputable people of His day.

### SEEING OURSELVES

- We are more inclined to follow our heart and our desires than to think about where those unexamined and untested desires are taking us.
- Because of our rashness, we often sin.
- We continually need Christ not only for forgiveness but for His Spirit of insight and direction.



### ADVOCATES FOR JUSTICE AND MERCY

*"The LORD hates . . . a false witness who speaks lies"*  
(6:16,19).

The word pictures and wise sayings of Solomon honor a helping attitude. This is the opposite of the false witness that God hates (6:19). Proverbs

warns that God is against those who withhold justice and mercy. But He is for those who give words of encouragement and a helping hand to those in need. Many of the proverbs picture kindness and mercy as basic values of God.

Whether Proverbs is speaking of humility or pride, truth or lies, honest work or fraud, caution or rashness, the underlying concern is always to encourage us to be messengers of help rather than harm:

☞ *Let not mercy and truth forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart (3:3).*

☞ *Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do so. Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come back, and tomorrow I will give it," when you have it with you (3:27-28).*

☞ *Dishonest scales are an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is His delight (11:1).*

☞ *He who speaks truth declares righteousness, but a false witness, deceit (12:17).*

☞ *A true witness delivers souls, but a deceitful witness speaks lies (14:25).*

☞ *He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who honors Him has mercy on the needy (14:31).*

☞ *In mercy and truth atonement is provided for iniquity; and by the fear of the LORD one departs from evil (16:6).*

☞ *Better is a little with righteousness, than vast revenues without justice (16:8).*

☞ *It is a joy for the just to do justice, but destruction will come to the workers of iniquity (21:15).*

☞ *He who oppresses the poor to increase his riches, and he who gives to the rich, will surely come to poverty (22:16).*

☞ *Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand all (28:5).*

☛ *Many seek the ruler's favor, but justice for man comes from the LORD (29:26).*

☛ *An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous, and he who is upright in the way is an abomination to the wicked (29:27).*

God's approach to justice and mercy is far reaching. It extends to the way we look at a derelict, to the way we treat our enemy, to the way we treat our dog. Mercy is the natural expression of a heart overflowing with the forgiveness, patience, and kindness of God. Mercy is the fitting response of a heart overwhelmed with the mercy it has received.

#### **SEEING GOD**

- Since God loves truth and mercy, He wants His people to be a source of honest help to everyone their lives touch.
- God takes personally any insult or harm done to a person of poverty or weakness.
- God experienced the pain of a perverted justice in a special way when His Son endured the lies of false witnesses who accused Him of sin.

#### **SEEING OURSELVES**

- When we show an honest concern for the needs and interests of others, we are mirroring the truth of God's interest in them.
- Because of our sinful nature, we are inclined to talk about others in a way that makes us look better than we are.
- When we are unkind, we can expect God's dislike of unkindness to affect us.
- If it were not for Christ's willingness to be both just and merciful to us, we would all die in our sins.



## CULTIVATORS OF PEACEFUL RELATIONSHIPS

*“The LORD hates . . . one who sows discord among brethren” (6:16,19).*

The wise sayings and word pictures of Solomon show us that God values peaceful relationships. He hates those who sow discord among brothers. He warns those who start a fight by gossip, anger, or meanness. He warns about the inflammatory results of meddling in other people’s business, mocking their accomplishments, publishing their failures, or proudly announcing one’s own achievements.

This is not to say that God values peace at any cost. The book of Proverbs shows that there is a time for conflict. Parents are told not to withhold correction from children for fear of the child’s loud cries of protest. A wise person is told to confront a fool without being dragged down to the fool’s level. And the Lord’s people are encouraged to be advocates of truth and justice, both of which have a way of making enemies along the way.

Wisdom, however, doesn’t go looking for a fight to break the boredom or prove a point. Wisdom studies the use of gentle answers, well-chosen words, and quick exits when they are appropriate.

Throughout Proverbs, God helps us to take another look at what we are fighting about and why:

☛ *Do not strive with a man without cause, if he has done you no harm (3:30).*

- ☞ *Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins (10:12).*
- ☞ *He who troubles his own house will inherit the wind, and the fool will be servant to the wise of heart (11:29).*
- ☞ *When a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him (16:7).*
- ☞ *A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends (16:28).*
- ☞ *He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends (17:9).*
- ☞ *The beginning of strife is like releasing water; therefore stop contention before a quarrel starts (17:14).*
- ☞ *He who loves transgression loves strife, and he who exalts his gate seeks destruction (17:19).*
- ☞ *Cast out the scoffer, and contention will leave; yes, strife and reproach will cease (22:10).*
- ☞ *He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears (26:17).*
- ☞ *Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife (26:20-21).*
- ☞ *Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful (27:6).*
- ☞ *As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend (27:17).*
- ☞ *He who is of a proud heart stirs up strife, but he who trusts in the LORD will be prospered (28:25).*
- ☞ *An angry man stirs up strife, and a furious man abounds in transgression (29:22).*

Proverbs shows us that peaceful relationships begin in the heart. A heart that is full of fearful anger will lash out defensively when threatened. A person who feels deprived of love is apt to react with envy and jealousy in the presence of others. Someone who is proud will disregard the interests and feelings of others. Someone who is bored may start a fight, while someone who craves attention and approval might pass along news of someone else's failure.

There is an honest longing for love and affirmation in the heart of everyone. God placed that desire for acceptance and accomplishment there. But God also made us so that we could find fulfillment and peace of mind only by filling ourselves with the goodness and kindness of God.

It is therefore not enough to know that we should not argue and complain and fight our way through life. It's more important that we let such proverbial knowledge drive us to the unseen motives and beliefs that lie beneath all disputes. We must allow the issues that are dividing us to help us to think through our own motives and what we really believe about God.

Do we believe that God can meet our deepest needs? Do we believe that He cares about us and our circumstances? Can we trust Him for the provisions of life? Or do we need to turn against one another to get what we want out of life?

#### **SEEING GOD**

- God's love for peace reflects the mutual love, respect, and cooperation that are shared in His own triune Godhead.
- God is a God of relationships, and because of that, all wisdom is ultimately relational.

- God's love for peace is never at the expense of His love for truth and justice.
- God's example and standard for peace-making is seen in the example of Christ, who went to war with evil and evil men to draw people to God and to one another.

#### **SEEING OURSELVES**

- Our natural tendencies toward pride, lying, self-protection, rewards without work, selfish hearts, and rashness incline us to divide more than to unite.
- Because real peace comes from God, we cannot be a source of peace unless we are first at peace with Him.
- We would be lost without Christ's willingness to die for our sins of conflict so He could offer us peace with His Father.

# WHEN THE PROVERBS DON'T WORK

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Every so often a letter comes to RBC Ministries that says something like this: “I can’t understand what happened. Proverbs says that if you ‘train up a child in the way he should go,’ he will stay true to the Lord. We did that. While we weren’t perfect parents, we took seriously God’s command to ‘train up a child’ in the way of God. But it didn’t work. Our son is not living for the Lord. He doesn’t go to church, he married outside of our faith, he has a problem with alcohol, and he can’t hold down a steady job. I’m frightened and confused. If I can’t trust the promises of God in Proverbs, what can I trust?”

What can we say to this brokenhearted and disillusioned parent? Proverbs does seem to offer promises, not only to parents but to children and individuals of every age. For example:

☛ *My son . . . let your heart keep my commands; for length of days and long life and peace they will add to you (3:1-2).*

☛ *Honor the LORD with your possessions . . . so your barns will be filled with plenty (3:9-10).*

☛ *When a man’s ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him (16:7).*

☛ *Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it (22:6).*

But there are exceptions. Think about Christ. No one fulfilled the wisdom of Proverbs more perfectly than He did. Yet He was never rich, and He died a

young man. While His ways always pleased the Father in heaven, His enemies were not at peace with Him at the time of His death. And before He came into this world as a child, the Lord was a perfect parent to the children of Israel, only to see them turn against and away from Him (Isa. 1:2).

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## **Christ Himself shows us that we must think carefully about the principles and promises of Proverbs.**

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To answer this problem, we must read the Proverbs as a whole collection. By reading each proverb in the context of other proverbs, we find at least four reasons to think carefully about the principles and promises of Proverbs.

**1. Human Freedom.** The book of Proverbs, read as a whole, makes it clear that while we can give our children the benefit of good training, we can't make their choices for them. We may urge our son to resist the enticements of sinners (1:10), but he's the one who chooses whether or not he will. He may opt to be a "scoffer" (13:1). He may choose to be a lazy person who "causes shame" to his parents (10:5).

The sound teaching and good example of parents make it likely that a child will take the path of wisdom. But it isn't certain that he will. Some still make the wrong choice and take the path of the foolish.

**2. Short-term Losses.** A decision that pleases God may be followed by short-term losses. For example, Proverbs points out that giving and taking bribes often furthers earthly success: "A present [bribe] is a precious stone in the eyes of its posses-

sor; wherever he turns, he prospers” (17:8). But the person who takes a bribe is called a “wicked man” who “pervert[s] the ways of justice” (17:23). Therefore the good choice—not to give or take a bribe—may cause a loss of income or influence. In the long run, however, “Treasures of wickedness [ill-gotten gain] profit nothing, but righteousness delivers from death” (10:2).

The person who rejects wrong, even though it would bring wealth and success, may never become rich. But he can find comfort in Proverbs 15:16, “Better a little with the fear of the LORD, than great treasure with trouble.” Proverbs, therefore, recognizes that good decisions may be costly. But it also shows us that good choices please God and provide treasures worth far more than earthly success and wealth.

**3. God’s Providence.** The blessings that flow from pleasing God are often earthly, physical, and material. But sometimes, for reasons known only to God, all human plans, efforts, and wisdom are frustrated. As Proverbs says, “There are many plans in a man’s heart, nevertheless the LORD’S counsel—that will stand” (19:21).

God has a perfect plan, and that plan is beyond human control. While the Lord allows for human freedom and assures us that He will bless us if we do His will, He alone determines the form His blessing will take. He may give material poverty for one who pleases Him, yet allow great wealth to a person who has no fear of God. To this possibility, Proverbs says, “Better the poor who walks in his integrity than one perverse in his ways, though he be rich” (28:6).

Faith enables us to trust God, even when His ways do not match our desires or expectations. By faith we are able to let God be God.

**4. Eternity.** When our sincere efforts to please God do not produce the rewards pictured in Proverbs, we need to look at life from the perspective of eternity. Even though the book of Proverbs does not speak specifically about life after death, it often implies that there is more to life than what we see in the present. When the wicked person dies, he has no expectation or hope (11:7). The righteous one, however, “has a refuge [a hope] in his death” (14:32). The eternal perspective is also present in this passage:

*But the path of the just is like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day. The way of the wicked is like darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble (4:18-19).*

We do know that Christ, who fulfilled the wisdom of Proverbs, is rich in eternity. There is no limit to His days or His joy. And ultimately, every one of His enemies will be at peace with Him. Philippians 2:11 says that “every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

When read as a whole collection in context, the wisdom of Proverbs drives us to the edge of eternity. Proverbs assures people living in a fallen world that while principles of wisdom often have a payoff in this life, they always have a payoff in the presence and unlimited time of God. Material success cannot compare with spiritual success. Neither can the years of time compare with the time of eternity.

Because of the invisible nature of the God behind the proverbs, some will call them a long shot. But for that same reason, you can bet your life on them!

# CHOICES

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When I was a small boy, I placed my trust in Christ and committed myself to live for Him. This choice set the direction of my life, but it did not eliminate further choices—my wife, my career, my places of service. I am continually choosing in matters that seem less important. This morning I faced a choice between a breakfast buffet—with scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, and pancakes—and a bowl of oatmeal. I made the healthy choice.

At age 72, I can look back and think of contemporaries—friends, relatives, and acquaintances—who made bad choices. Some decided to ignore or reject Jesus Christ. Some chose the path of immoral living. Some chose to smoke and eat too much. Many of them are now dead. Some are living, but they are tortured with regrets. Some dread the future because they have no hope.

True, some people who made and still make good choices are poor and in ill health. But they have inner peace and hope because they chose to receive Jesus Christ as Savior.

Proverbs sets before all its readers the process of choosing between the path of “wisdom” and that of “folly,” between faith and unbelief. It warns us that there is a way that seems right, “but its end is the way of death” (16:25). Today, Proverbs gives us reason to choose the One who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn. 14:6). This right choice will help you make good choices the rest of your journey and will lead you to heaven.

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